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**An Israeli plan to transfer Galilee's
Christians to South America:
Yosef Weitz and "Operation Yohanan"
1949-53**

by

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An Israeli plan to transfer
Galilee's Christians to South America:
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Introduction

The idea of "transferring" the Palestinians - a euphemism denoting the organized removal of the Arab population of Palestine to neighbouring or distant countries - was held widely in Israel after 1948. In fact, the concept - delicately described by its proponents as population exchange, emigration, resettlement and rehabilitation of the Palestinians in Arab countries or elsewhere, etc. - is deeply rooted in Zionism. As demonstrated in my earlier book *Expulsion of the Palestinians: the Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought 1882-1948* (1992), the "transfer" notion was embedded in the Zionist perception that the Land of Israel or Palestine is a Jewish birthright and belongs exclusively to the Jewish people as a whole, and, consequently, that Palestinian Arabs are "strangers" who should either accept Jewish sovereignty over the land or depart.

This study discusses "Operation Yohanan", a secret transfer scheme that Israeli ministers and senior officials attempted to promote after 1948. In 1948, the Zionist concept of transfer had not been applied universally, and the Israeli army's expulsion policy failed to rid the new Jewish state of a small Arab minority that remained *in situ*. However, having expelled 750,000 Palestinian Arabs from the greatly enlarged boundaries of the state and having reduced the Arab population from a large majority to a small minority, the pragmatic Labour leadership believed that it had largely, although not entirely, solved its land/settlement and political "demographic" problems, and was prepared reluctantly to tolerate the presence of a small, politically subordinate and economically dependent Arab minority - some 150,000 Palestinians of the over 900,000 who used to reside in the areas that became the State of Israel in the aftermath of the 1948 war.

Demography, land and water were always at the heart of the conflict between the Zionist immigrants/settlers and the native Palestinians. The quest for

land and demography also underpinned the Zionist concept of transfer in the pre-1948 period. In a sense, Zionism's long-lasting battle against the native Palestinians was a battle for "more land and less Arabs". This battle was dictated essentially by the premises and fundamentals of Zionism: the "ingathering" of the world's Jews in Palestine, and the acquisition and conquest of land ("Kibbush Haadamah"), and the establishment of a state for the Jews - who mostly had yet to arrive in Palestine - at the expense of the displaced and "transferred" Palestinians. The creation of Israel did not alter Zionism's premises and fundamentals with regard to the Palestinian minority under Israeli control. Indeed, the principal objective of the Israeli state, as defined in terms of its Zionist ideology, is the fulfilment of the aspirations of the Jewish majority and of prospective Jewish immigrants, frequently at the expense of the aspirations of the Palestinian minority.

In search of international recognition for the newly-proclaimed state, the Israeli Provisional State Council, the forerunner of the Knesset, included in the Independence Charter a promise that the Jewish state would "uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of religion, race, and sex". What, in fact, took place was exactly the opposite. After its establishment, Israel treated the Palestinians still remaining within its frontiers almost as foreigners. It swiftly imposed a military government in the areas inhabited by the Arab minority, expropriated over half of the lands of this "non-Jewish" population, and pursued various policies of demographic containment, political control, exclusionary domination, and systematic discrimination in all spheres of life. The military government was imposed by Prime Minister and Defence Minister David Ben-Gurion, and it became associated closely both with his hostile attitude towards the Arab minority and his authoritarian style and almost unchallenged leadership of the ruling Mapai (labour) Party. The daily *Haaretz* reported in 1958 that Ben-Gurion had refused the identity card issued to him because it was printed in Arabic as well as Hebrew.¹ Remarking on this report, Uri Avnery, then chief editor of *Ha'olam Haze* magazine and later a member of the Israeli Knesset, wrote:

Ben-Gurion has always been utterly reactionary in his opposition to anything Arab. The prime minister has never visited an Arab town or village since the establishment of the state. When he visited the Jewish town of Upper Nazareth, he refused to visit Arab Nazareth, only a few hundred metres away from the Jewish town. In the first ten years after the establishment of the state, Ben-Gurion did not receive a single delegation of Arab citizens.²

Ben-Gurion's views about the Arab citizens echoed deep-seated sentiments within the Mapai establishment, sentiments that found their most crude embodiment in the establishment of military rule in the Arab areas. Generally speaking, the supporters of Ben-Gurion's militarist approach deemed that the

¹ *Haaretz*, 30 April 1958.

² Quoted in David Gilmour, *Dispossessed: the Ordeal of the Palestinians* (London: Sphere Books Limited, 1982), pp. 93-4.

"security" aspect must take precedence over any other considerations in dealing with the Arab minority.

Officially the purpose of imposing martial law and military government on Israel's Arab minority was security. However, its establishment, which lasted until 1966, was intended to serve a number of both stated and concealed objectives. The first objective was to prevent the return of the Palestinian refugees, or "infiltrators" in Israeli terminology, to their homes. A second goal was:

to evacuate semi-abandoned [Arab] neighborhoods and villages as well as some which had not been abandoned - and to transfer their inhabitants to other parts of the country. Some were evacuated from a "security cordon" along the borders, and others were removed in order to make room for Jews.¹

The third purpose of the military government was to maintain control and supervision over the Israeli Arabs, who were separated and isolated from the Jewish population.²

The Israeli State Archives in Jerusalem contain dozens of official files with extensive information pertaining to Israel's policies towards the Arab minority, including what usually is described in Israel as "population transfers". Although a substantial part of these files are open to researchers and have been used for this study, many official files remain classified. However, some idea about the contents of these closed files may be gathered from the Archives' index listing those files of the ministry of minorities: Expulsion of Inhabitants; Transfer of Inhabitants; Concentration of Arab Residents; Complaints about Police Treatment; Demolition of Arab Houses; and Acts against Civilians.³

Although most Labour leaders did not view the existence of a small, politically controlled and economically dependent, Arab minority in the Jewish state as seriously endangering the Zionist programme, the most influential leaders, including Ben-Gurion and (the relatively moderate) Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett supported in the 1950s various proposals and schemes aimed at further reducing that Arab minority. For example, "Operation Yohanan", discussed in this study, was an attempt to transfer Israeli Arab citizens to Brazil and Argentina. Why did Ben-Gurion, Sharett, and other leaders back, in principle, "Operation Yohanan"? The answer to this question lies, in part, in the widespread sentiment among Israeli leaders and army commanders that "too many Arabs" remained in Israel in the post-1948 period, a sentiment derived from Zionist premises and fundamentals, particularly the principle of a demographically homogenous Jewish state with "more land (under Jewish control) and less Arabs". Moreover the available evidence shows that during the early years of the state, the Arab question in Israel was considered a temporary one.

¹ Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 52.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 64.

In fact, many Israeli Jews expected the Arab minority to disappear so that they would not have to establish permanent relations with it.¹

As far as most important Israeli leaders were concerned, the total transfer/expulsion of a peaceful, unarmed, and subdued minority was no longer an option in the 1950s, largely because the establishment of the State of Israel had introduced domestic and international constraints with regard to total transfer. However, not all Israeli leaders accepted the permanency of the Arab minority during the 1950s. Leaders such as Yosef Weitz, Director of the Jewish National Fund's (JNF's) Land Settlement Department, remained obsessed with voluntary transfer, principally because of its perceived connection with the land issue and the need to take over more land from the Arab minority for prospective Jewish immigrants. "Operation Yohanan", which was backed by the prime minister and most important ministers, vividly demonstrates Weitz's obsession with regard to the remaining Arab minority. "Operation Yohanan" originated in 1950 as a plan to transfer over 20 Christian Arab families from a village in the Galilee to Argentina. As Weitz wrote in a June 1951 letter to Ya'acov Tzur, Israel's ambassador to Argentina:

The chief purpose of this matter [Operation Yohanan] is the transfer of the Arab population from Israel. I have always, and already before the establishment of the state, feared the Arab minority in our midst [i.e., in Israel], and these fears are still existing, not in theory but in practice. In addition to this, we lack land, and if not now, we will feel its shortage after a short time, when the objective of "curtailing the exiles" [reducing Jewish diaspora through immigration to Israel] is realized. By the transfer of the Arab minority from Israel through mutual agreement, we will achieve a solution for the two [above-stated] problems, and the more we make progress in the [objective], the better it will be for the state. From this viewpoint I see the wish for one group from the village of Gush Halav [Jish, in the Galilee] as the beginning of the way to realize the idea.²

This extraordinary letter implied the *total* transfer, "through mutual agreement", of the peaceful, small Arab minority and reflected Weitz's continuing obsession with transfer. In the end "Operation Yohanan" collapsed because, according to Weitz, the Palestinians who initially had expressed interest in emigrating to Argentina had lost interest by 1953. Immediately after the failure of "Operation Yohanan", Weitz himself became involved in a plan to resettle Palestinian refugees and Israeli Arabs in Libya.

This study is based largely on Hebrew primary sources, including recently declassified archival material in the Israeli State Archives and the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. These primary sources were supplemented by secondary works in Hebrew and English.

¹ Sammy Smooha, "Existing and alternative policy towards Arabs in Israel", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1982), p. 74.

² Yosef Weitz, JNF, to Ya'acov Tzur, ambassador to Argentina, letter dated 15 June 1951, in Israel State Archives (ISA), foreign ministry, 2402/16.

An Israeli plan to transfer Galilee's

Christians to South America:

Yosef Weitz and "Operation Yohanan" 1949-53

The involvement of Yosef Weitz in the Jewish Agency's Transfer Committees between 1937 and 1944 and the actual transfer activities of 1948 has been extensively discussed in my book *Expulsion of the Palestinians: the Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought 1882-1948*. In his capacity as the director of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) Land Settlement Department Weitz stood at the centre of the Yishuv's¹ land-purchasing activities. He, like other JNF leaders and executives (such as Menahem Ussishkin, Avraham Granovsky, Yosef Nahmani), was engaged in practical colonization and a perennial search for Arab land to purchase, and was gripped by the "transfer" notion as a radical, fundamental solution to both the land question and Arab demography; Arab evacuation, as revealed in his diary, was an *idée fixe* which dominated Weitz's mind and activities for many years before, during and after the 1948 war. Weitz's approach was a combination of maximalist aims and pragmatic, practical and flexible means to achieve Arab removal. On 20 December 1940 Weitz entered in his diary:

Amongst ourselves it must be clear that there is no room for both peoples in this country. No "development" will bring us closer to our aim to be an independent people in this small country. With Arab transferring the country will be wide-open for us. And with the Arabs staying the country will remain narrow and restricted...and the only solution is the Land of Israel, or at least the western Land of Israel [i.e. Palestine], without Arabs. There is no room for compromise on this point...the only solution is to transfer the Arabs from here to neighbouring countries, all of them, except perhaps Bethlehem, Nazareth and Old Jerusalem. Not a single village or a single tribe must be left. And the transfer must be done through their absorption in Iraq and Syria and even in Transjordan. For that goal money will be found and even a lot of money. And only then will the country be able to absorb millions of Jews and a solution will be found to the Jewish question. There is no other solution.²

¹ The Yishuv (Hebrew for "settlement"): the Jewish community in Palestine prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

² Central Zionist Archives (CZA), Weitz Diary, A 246/7, entry for 20 December 1940, pp. 1090-1. One of the best sources for an insight into the Yishuv leadership's attempt to promote transfer schemes from 1938 through World War II and in 1948 may be found in the unedited manuscript of the Weitz diary which is located in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. The first five volumes of the diary were edited and published in 1965: Yosef Weitz, *Yomani Veigrotai Lebanim*, [My Diary and Letters to the Children], (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1965). This massive diary was started in 1932 and continued until the death of Weitz in 1970.

Weitz's relentless "land-redemption" and "transfer" activities continued after the establishment of Israel, through the 1950s, with the aim of reducing still further the small Arab minority. Weitz believed as few as possible of those Arabs who had remained in Israel should be granted Israeli citizenship and be allowed to vote and be elected to the Knesset. When three Arabs (out of a total of 120 members) were elected to the first Knesset in 1949, Weitz recorded in his diary: "[I felt] cold in [my] heart and angry in [my] soul...I would not like [the Arabs] to be many [in the Knesset]." ¹ On 12 November 1954 Weitz also recorded in his diary that Yosef Avidar, head of the Israel Defence Force (IDF) general staff branch (who later became: ambassador to the USSR, 1955-8; director-general, ministry of labour, 1959-60; ambassador to Argentina, 1961-8 and comptroller of the Histadrut trade union, 1968-71) visited him in Jerusalem to talk about the fate of the Arab citizens of the "Little Triangle". Weitz told Avidar about the letter that he, Weitz, had sent to Moshe Dayan [the army chief of staff] "in connection with the granting of citizenship" to Arabs who lived there, a matter which had prevented them "from settling this Triangle". The chief of staff [Dayan] replied to Weitz that he, like Weitz, also regretted "this measure which was taken contrary to his opinion." ²

In May 1949 the Triangle and Wadi 'Arah were annexed to Israel, following the Rhodes agreement signed with Jordan on 3 April 1949, and subsequently about 31,000 Arabs of these regions were granted Israeli citizenship, apparently contrary to the wishes of Weitz and his colleagues. Weitz reveals in his diary that he set out on the morning of 5 February 1950 from Ben Shemen, together with JNF staff and colleagues, including 'Ezra Danin (a member of the 1948 Transfer Committee and senior adviser on Arab affairs to the foreign ministry, 1948-9) and visited the large Arab village of 'Ar'arah in Wadi 'Arah. After the visit Weitz recorded that a number of Arabs were prepared to sell land to the JNF: "We turned back to Hadera to the house of 'Ezra Danin, and there we met with Goel, the military governor of the Triangle, and we summarized together our [land-] purchasing activities. All were of one opinion: it is possible to purchase most of the Triangle's land and the Arabs would emigrate from here." ³

More important, however, was the meeting held three days later, on 8 February, at the prime minister's office in Jerusalem. The meeting was called by Ben-Gurion (prime minister and defence minister) "in order to determine the government's policy towards the Arab minority." ⁴ It was attended by 18 persons including the foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, the then army chief of staff Yigael Yadin, the prime minister's adviser for Arab affairs, Yehoshu'a Palmon, and Weitz. Almost all the participants spoke; Sharett did so twice. According

¹ Cited in Tom Segev, *1949: Hayisraelim Harishonim* [1949: the First Israelis] (Jerusalem: Domino Press, 1984), p. 56.

² Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, entry for 12 November 1954, p. 271.

³ *Ibid.*, entry for 5 February 1950, p. 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, entry for 8 February 1950, p. 72.

to Weitz's diary, it was Yigael Yadin (the chief architect of Plan Dalet and OC Operations during the 1948 war and its Arab exodus) who stated it clearly: "an Arab minority among us [i.e. in Israel], constitutes a danger in war time and in peace time. I [Weitz] expressed the same opinion. When I spoke I said that the lack of a clear line in the government's policy on this matter led to their [the Arabs] increase, almost twofold. Their emigration should be encouraged by paying [them for] the price of their properties, including land."

Weitz recorded that he was dissatisfied that his proposal was not adopted as a policy line at this meeting.¹ It is not clear what was decided at the meeting. However, a few weeks later the prime minister's adviser for Arab affairs, Palmon, wrote a letter to Sharett saying that in line with the conclusions of the meeting he "had checked the situation regarding...the encouragement of the departure of Arabs from Israel" and found that Christians would be prepared to leave for Lebanon and Muslims for Egypt. Palmon added that he had "checked also the possibility of exchanging property of Arabs in Israel with that of Jews in Egypt and Lebanon" and had found that it was possible "to find an arrangement for the matter in these countries." Also, the "departure of Jews from Lebanon and Egypt and the entry of [Israeli] Arabs to these countries could be arranged." According to Palmon, two Arab collaborators could be used to assist in implementing this proposal: Daud Dajjani and 'Ali Mustaqim. Palmon concluded: "it is possible to begin the attempts" at implementation; "if approval of this proposal is given, a plan and budget should be prepared to begin action," and he asked Sharett for an answer as soon as possible.²

Moreover, around the same time, the idea that the Arab citizens should be "encouraged" to emigrate overseas, particularly to South America, was widely, though privately, held among senior Israeli ministers and officials. For instance on 1 January 1950 the foreign ministry director-general, Walter Eytan, wrote to Tzur, saying that some residents of Arab villages (apparently in the Galilee) had expressed "readiness to leave for South American countries" if they were to be assisted in this. Eytan went on to explain that such a plan was, in itself, "desirable". Such assistance would have to include finding suitable lands for agricultural settlement. "It seems that they assume here [in Jerusalem] that part of the lands, which had been purchased at the time of Baron Hirsch,³ are not being cultivated by Jewish settlers, and that it is possible to place them at the disposition of the Arabs, who would emigrate," he wrote. However, the foreign ministry director-general was fully aware that attempts to carry out such a plan were bound to raise problems: "I [hardly] need to explain to you the political implication of the fact that the emigrating Arabs come from Israel. No doubt such emigration would be seen in certain circles as proof that we are treating the Arab residents harshly and forcing them to abandon their homes."

¹ Ibid.

² See letter signed by B. Shmueli, to foreign minister, dated 16 March 1950, no. 89/10935, in Israel State Archives (ISA), foreign ministry, 2402/16.

³ Baron Maurice de Hirsch founded in 1891 the Jewish Colonization Association with the aim of promoting colonization work in North and South America, particularly in Argentina.

Eytan wanted to hear the opinion of Israel's ambassador to Buenos Aires on a number of questions: (1) Would the Argentinian government allow in Arab migrants from Israel? (2) Were there any lands for agricultural settlement? (3) Would the appearance of Arab migrants from Israel have an undesirable effect on Argentinian public opinion? (4) Were the agricultural conditions in Argentina suitable for rural Israeli Arabs?¹

Eytan's letter reached Tzur two months later. In his reply, Tzur pointed out that he had already been approached by Weitz on the same subject, and that he was also in favour of such a plan: "For me the matter seems possible from many points of view. However, I regret that no concrete proposal was presented to us, until now, detailing the conditions and the factors in this process of emigration. I asked Mr Weitz for further details and I hope to receive them and begin a serious investigation into the possibilities."² In this context it should be pointed out that Tzur was not merely a diplomat posted in a distant country; he, like his colleague Weitz, was an influential leader of Labour Zionism. Tzur was the Director of the JNF Information Department from 1929 to 1948 and a regular contributor to the newspapers *Davar* and *Haaretz*.³ Between 1949 and 1953 he was ambassador to Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile and was based in Buenos Aires. In 1953 he was appointed ambassador to France, where he served until 1959. Upon his return to Israel, following a brief period as director-general of the foreign ministry, he was elected chairman of the World Zionist Organization's Actions Committee and of the JNF.

The correspondence described above between Weitz (representing the JNF), Eytan (at the foreign ministry) and Tzur (in Argentina) were preliminary explorations of what was officially and secretly termed later "Mivtza'a Yohanan" ("Operation Yohanan"): the attempt to transfer the Christian Arab population of northern Galilee, beginning with the Maronite village of Jish, to Argentina and Brazil.

However, before describing "Operation Yohanan" in detail, some information about Arab villages in Upper Galilee at that time is pertinent: first, on 5 November 1948, the residents of three Christian Arab villages in this region, Iqrit, Kafr Biri'im and al-Mansurah, who had surrendered to the Israeli army without a fight earlier in October, were ordered by the army to evacuate their villages "for a period of two weeks, until the end of military activity in the area."⁴ At the same time the population of the Muslim villages of Nabi Rubin

¹ Walter Eytan, foreign ministry, to Ya'acov Tzur, ambassador to Argentina, secret letter, dated 1 January 1950, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15.

² From Ya'acov Tzur to Walter Eytan, foreign ministry, secret letter, dated 28 February 1950, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15. Tzur also sent a reply to Yosef Weitz, with a copy to the foreign ministry.

³ Protocol of the Knesset (Hebrew) 1951, p. 1011, cited in Baruch Kimmerling, *Land Conflict and Nation Building* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, the Hebrew University, 1976), p. 245. See also Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-49* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 237-8.

and Tarbikhah in the same area was expelled by the army to Lebanon.¹ The army had initially wanted to drive the villagers of Kafr Biri'im, Iqrit and al-Mansurah (as well as Jish) across the Lebanese border, but this order was modified and most of them were transported to the Arab village of Ramah,² and were later scattered throughout several Arab villages in the area, including the village of Jish, which was allowed to remain. When, two years after the fighting ended, the government refused to allow them to return to their villages, the evacuees appealed in July 1951 to the Supreme Court, which ruled that there was no legal obstacle to their return to their villages. The government reacted by ordering their eviction, this time in accordance with the 1948 Emergency Regulations-Defense Areas. Once again the evacuees appealed to the Supreme Court, but on 25 December 1951, before the court convened, all the houses of Iqrit, apart from the local church, were bombed. Over 300,000 dunums of land surrounding the villages were confiscated and declared "abandoned property" and some of this land was distributed among newly-established Jewish settlements, particularly Kibbutz Bara'am (1949) and Moshav Dovev (1958).³ (For years thereafter the exiles of Kafr Biri'im, Iqrit and al-Mansurah, who now totalled about 10,000 persons, pleaded unsuccessfully with the government and campaigned publicly to be allowed to return to their villages.)

Secondly, the eviction of Iqrit, Biri'im and al-Mansurah was, in fact, part of a much bigger plan aimed at clearing the entire region of Arabs and creating an Arab-free Upper Galilee. This plan was only partially implemented. In *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Benny Morris writes: "The case of Biri'im, Iqrit and Al Mansura illustrates how deeply rooted was the IDF's determination from November 1948 onwards to create a northern border strip clear of Arabs. That determination quickly spread to the civilian institutions of state, particularly those concerned with the establishment of new settlements and settlement of new olim [immigrants]. Weitz and other settlement executives immediately began planning new settlements along the border strip (5-15 kilometres deep)." ⁴ This determination was again illustrated in a new plan, approved by Ben-Gurion and the defence establishment towards the end of 1949, to expel the remaining Arab inhabitants of the region. On 4 December 1949, several months after the fighting ended, Eytan, the director-general of the foreign ministry mentioned above, sent Foreign Minister Sharett, who was in New York, the following letter: "Zalman Lif [Lifschitz, a member of the 1948 government Transfer Committee] told me today that there is a plan to expel the Arab residents in a considerable number of places, particularly in the Galilee, and these are the facts: 1) the villages whose residents will be expelled are: Fassutah, Tarshihah, Mi'ilyah, Jish (including the people of Biri'im, who are residing there), Hurfeish, Rihaniyah - these are in the Galilee, as well as the al-

¹ Morris, *The Birth*, p. 237.

² Haaretz, 11 August 1972; Morris, *The Birth*, p. 237.

³ Kimmerling, *Land Conflict*.

⁴ Morris, *The Birth*, p. 239.

Majdal [town] and Zakariyah (near Bayt Nattif); 2) the number of people who will be expelled exceeds 10,000; 3) the expulsion, meaning the forcible removal to other places, is needed for security reasons; 4) the prime minister [Ben-Gurion] approved the plan; however, he will not implement it without your [i.e. Sharett's] consent and the consent of Mr [Eli'ezer] Kaplan [the finance minister]. This operation will cost one million Israeli Lira, which is the cost of resettling the evictees; 5) Lif said that they are going to carry out the plan 'without excessive brutality.' (On another occasion in the same conversation he [Lifschitz] said: 'without excessive cruelty')." Eytan added: "most of the candidates for eviction in the [Upper] Galilee are Christians, Druze (in Hurfeish) and Circassians (in Rihaniyah)." He also told Sharett that in his conversation with Lifschitz he had expressed reservations on political grounds regarding the expulsion of such a large number of people.¹ However, as we shall see, Eytan was among the advocates of "voluntary transfer" of Christian Arabs from Upper Galilee to South America.

In the event, however, the removal of some of these communities (the town of al-Majdal and the village of Zakariyah) was carried out.² The inhabitants of Tarshihah, in particular, resisted the Israeli pressures to evacuate, and stayed put and other villages including Rihaniyah, Josh, Hurfeish and Mi'ilyah remained.³ Nevertheless the resurfacing of plans, many months after the fighting ended, aimed at clearing Upper Galilee completely of Arabs, are part of the background against which "Operation Yohanan" began to emerge towards the end of 1950.

On 4 October 1950 Weitz recorded in his diary that a JNF colleague, Hanokhi, had told him about a group of people from the Maronite village of Jish who had got in touch with JNF officials and told them that they were ready to sell their lands and to depart to Argentina, where they could engage in agriculture. "I asked for a list of the owners and their lands, in order to convey it to Ya'acov Tzur [ambassador to Argentina] and to ask him for his opinion," Weitz recorded.⁴ In his letter to Weitz, dated 6 October, Yosef Nahmani, the Tiberias-based JNF representative in the Galilee, wrote about a delegation representing 22 families from Jish, (about a quarter of the village inhabitants), who had visited his office in Tiberias and asked him for "assistance in liquidation of their property in the village and their transfer to Argentina", where they had relatives, who emigrated there many years previously. The letter gave details

¹ From Walter Eytan to Moshe Sharett (New York), secret letter, dated 4 December 1949, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/29a.

² In January 1950 Prime Minister Ben-Gurion met Bechor Shitrit, minister of minorities affairs and policy (May 1948-April 1949). Weitz and other officials in Tiberias and decided to remove the inhabitants of Zakariyah, al-Majdal and several other villages. On 9 June 1950 the inhabitants of Zakariyah were evicted; some were expelled to Jordan and others were brought to Ramle. See Morris, *The Birth*, pp. 250-1. On the "transfer" of the remaining 2,700 inhabitants of al-Majdal to Gaza in 1950, see Benny Morris, *1948 and After* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 257-69.

³ Morris, *The Birth*, pp. 240 and 251.

⁴ Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, entry for 4 October 1950, p. 103.

about the 22 families and their property: they numbered 153 persons and owned 28 houses and 1200 dunums, two-thirds of which were planted with olive and fig trees. Their proposal was that they should receive four unplanted dunums in Argentina for every planted dunum they owned in Jish and a dunum for every other dunum. In addition they wanted the Israeli authorities to pay half of the cost of travel to Argentina.¹ (The population of Jish was estimated in 1959 at 1,400 people and in 1968 at 1,650.)

It is difficult to ascertain what urged these 22 families to want to emigrate. Certainly, by tradition the emigration of Christian Arabs, and particularly of Maronites, from the Galilee and Lebanon to North and South America, was not uncommon. Some of these families also had relations in Argentina. It is very likely, however, that the eviction of the inhabitants of other neighbouring Christian and Maronite villages (of Iqrit, Kafr Biri'im and al-Mansurah), some of whom were trucked to Jish, had an unsettling impact on the residents of Jish, who themselves were earmarked for expulsion from November 1948 and through 1949. Other likely factors were the pressures from the defence establishment and the JNF officialdom, both of which, as has already been shown, wanted Upper Galilee to be completely clear of Arabs. The JNF executives, in particular, were at the forefront of efforts to "redeem" the Galilee lands from the Arabs. On 11 January 1953, Nahmani himself sent a memorandum to the prime minister and defence minister, Ben-Gurion, (a copy was also sent to President Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi) expressing concern that the Arabs had remained in significant numbers in the Galilee after the establishment of Israel. The JNF had not been able to "redeem" large areas of land in the Galilee before 1948. Nahmani wrote:

Western Galilee has been occupied, but it has not been freed of its Arab population, as happened in other parts of the country. 51 unabandoned villages and the town of Nazareth remain in it. In all its Arab inhabitants are 84,002 (not counting Acre) controlling 929,549 dunums of land. Its Arab population, mostly agricultural, makes up approximately 45 per cent of the Arab minority in our state, and is concentrated in a homogenous continuous area, bordering Arab Lebanon. This concentrated Arab minority presents a continual threat to the security and integrity of the state. 1) [This minority] is likely to add to the burdens of the government and to create problems when the boundaries of our state are finally defined. The very existence of a homogenous group in this part of the country is a factor strengthening the claim of Arab states to the area ... in accordance with the UN resolution of November 1947; 2) At a suitable opportunity [this Arab minority is likely] to play a role similar to the one played by the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia at the outbreak of World War II; 3) [It is likely] to be a motivating factor for the crystallisation of an Arab nationalist movement, influenced by the nationalist movements in the neighbouring countries, and guided and used by them to undermine the stability of the State.²

¹ Ibid., appendix no. 5, p. 358.

² Quoted in Yosef Weitz, *Yosef Nahmani: Ish Hagalit* [Yosef Nahmani: a Man of Galilee] (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1969), pp. 118-20, 134.

It should be pointed out that the so-called German "example" in Czechoslovakia was repeatedly cited in the Jewish Agency Executive discussions of 7 and 12 July 1938, which were largely devoted to the transfer solution. During these discussions as well as in the discussions of the Jewish Agency Transfer Committees between December 1937 and 1942, in which Nahmani took part, many leading Zionists used the so-called Sudeten "precedent" to justify their advocacy of Arab removal. In January 1953, Nahmani was still viewing the Arab citizens of Israel from the same perspective as that from which he had viewed the Palestinian Arabs in the 1930s and 1940s before the creation of Israel. He concluded his memorandum to Ben-Gurion with the following: "[It is] essential to break up this concentration [of Arabs in the Galilee] through [Jewish] settlement... There is no doubt that after peace is achieved with neighbouring countries, a part of the Arab residents, who have not reconciled themselves to the existence of the State of Israel, will leave the country, and for that a policy of encouraging [departure] should be pursued."¹ Similar proposals were repeated in Nahmani's letters to President Ben-Tzvi, a personal friend of Nahmani, dated 27 July 1953 and 21 December 1955.² In a similar vein, Weitz also recorded in his diary on 17 January 1951, after meeting in Haifa with JNF officials who took charge of Arab "absentee property", that there were cases of Arabs in Acre, whose lands in Western Galilee had been distributed among Jewish settlements, such as Gesher Haziv and Ben 'Ami:³ "The Arabs [in Acre] are demanding their lands in accordance with the law, and then a gap in our settlement would be created. Yet these [Arabs] are not always prepared to sell, and if yes they would demand high prices, or exchange of [their lands for other lands]. The second condition is even worse than the first. It is not in our view that the rural Arab settlement should be strengthened."⁴

During the early months of 1951 Weitz and other JNF executives began to prepare the ground for the implementation of "Operation Yohanan". Nahmani advised the representative of the Arab families from Jish to approach directly the Argentinian consul in Israel, and on 8 March 1951 a delegation representing the families met the consul and handed him a written request for emigration to Argentina, stating that they were motivated by personal and economic reasons and sought to work in agriculture in Argentina.⁵ On 21 April Weitz paid a private visit to the finance minister, Eli'ezer Kaplan, at his house in Jerusalem, where he found Dr Bergman, the finance ministry's adviser on foreign currency. "I raised in front of them the question of the foreign currency

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., pp. 121 and 134.

³ Gesher Haziv is a Kibbutz in Western Upper Galilee founded in 1949 on the lands of the large destroyed Arab village, al-Zib. Ben-'Ami is a Moshav set up in September 1949.

⁴ Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, entry for 17 January 1951, p. 119.

⁵ The consul also visited Jish on 23 March 1951, and held a conversation with those interested in emigrating to Argentina. He promised his assistance and urged them to conclude their financial arrangements with the JNF in order to secure the required funds for resettling in Argentina. See Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, appendix no. 5, p. 358.

required for the purchase of lands from Israeli Arabs, who leave the country. Kaplan promised to respond positively to this request, which I put for the time being at 100 thousand [Israeli] Lira," Weitz recorded.¹ A few months earlier Weitz had written to Tzur explaining, in general terms, the idea of transferring Christian Arab citizens from Israel to Argentina. Ambassador Tzur, as has already been shown, was very much in favour of such a proposal, which he considered feasible, but he still wanted the submission of a "concrete" plan and the clarification of certain details concerning its implementation, and this he raised in his letter to Weitz dated 10 May 1951. In response, Weitz wrote a most revealing letter to Tzur, in Buenos Aires, (a copy was also sent to Foreign Minister Sharett), dated 15 June 1951, outlining the main aims behind the undertaking of "Operation Yohanan", and some of the steps required before its implementation. Weitz explained:

The chief purpose of this matter is the transfer of the Arab population from Israel. I have always, and already before the establishment of the state, feared the Arab minority in our midst, and these fears are still existing, not in theory but in practice. In addition to this, we lack land, and if not now, we will feel its shortage after a short time, when the objective of "curtailing the exiles" [reducing Jewish diaspora through immigration to Israel] is realized. By the transfer of the Arab minority from Israel through mutual agreement, we will achieve a solution for the two [above-stated] problems, and the more we make progress in this [objective], the better it will be for the state. From this viewpoint I see the wish of one group from the village of Gush Halav [Jish] as the beginning of the way to realize the idea.²

It is crystal clear from this letter that for Weitz (and, as we shall see, for the prime minister's office, Foreign Minister Sharett and Ambassador Tzur) "Operation Yohanan" was not concerned merely with the "transfer" of a small group - 22 families - from a single village (Jish) in Upper Galilee, to South America, but had rather the much more ambitious goal of substantially reducing the Arab minority in general, and the Christian Arab citizens in the Galilee in particular.

In his above-mentioned letter to Ambassador Tzur, Weitz went on to say that this "transfer" operation "could only be carried out by the JNF (with the government's approval and full cooperation)." Weitz had to clarify another point:

it seems that my words in my first letter to you were not sufficiently clear, and therefore they have given rise to the thought that I "link" the transfer of Christian Arabs from Israel to South American countries to the idea of exchanging their properties here with agricultural properties of those Jewish settlers [in Argentina]. This is not so; I did not see this connection as a basis or stipulation. The only basis is: the transfer of this population from Israel, and Latin American countries have been chosen

¹ Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, entry for 21 April 1951, p. 134.

² Weitz, JNF, to Ya'acov Tzur, ambassador to Argentina, letter dated 15 June 1951, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/16.

because they [the families from Jish] have pinned their hopes on them. The possibility of exchanging property between them and farmers there [in Argentina] I see as a means, and perhaps as a means of the first degree, for this purpose, if by this Jews would immigrate to Israel, even if they would not agree to live in the exchanged villages here.

Weitz further suggested that the "JNF should 'study' the ways of implementing [the transfer of the Christian Arabs to South America] and the possibility of practical and comprehensive investigation..." Only then could a conclusion be reached about whether this way was "realistic or not". "The above reasons," Weitz went on, "brought me to the thought of taking over myself the [task] of clarifying all sides of this problem in Latin [American] countries to which the emigration [from Israel] would be directed. Also in our [JNF's] office they believe the same, and the Foreign Minister M. Sharett, in his letter to me dated 5 June 1951, following the receipt of a copy of your letter, also shares this opinion." Furthermore, Weitz explained to Tzur that his travel to South America could not be undertaken in the next two months, before the convening of the 23rd Congress of the World Zionist Organization,¹ to which he was a delegate representing the ruling Mapai Party, and because this Congress was going to discuss the "mission" of the Zionist movement, its institutions and organization, including the JNF. Weitz's intention to travel to South America after the Zionist Congress also coincided with the date which had earlier been suggested by Tzur. Concluding his letter to Tzur, Weitz wrote:

When I pay a visit to Argentina I will also deal, of course, with the question of the possible acclimatization [introduction] of plants from those countries in Israel, and certainly also with Zionist matters. But the main subject is the one stated above, and, if I may explain again, I rely to a great extent on the assistance which you will extend to me, both as Israel's ambassador and Ya'acov Tzur, the comrade in joint work for many years. And therefore I ask you already now to equip me with any material and literature, in which I could find clarification and information on the above mentioned matters.²

On Saturday 25 August 1951, during the period of the 23rd Zionist Congress convened in Jerusalem, Weitz met at his home with Yitzhak Navon, then secretary to Foreign Minister Sharett and later president of the State of Israel, and Ambassador Tzur, who was back in Jerusalem, and discussed the plan of transferring the Christian Arabs of Upper Galilee to South America. "We have concluded that my plan deserves exploration on the ground by me, although Ya'acov Tzur expressed apprehensions from a political point of view. We decided to bring our conclusion before the Foreign Minister," Weitz recorded.³ Three days later, on the morning of 28 August, Weitz and Tzur met Sharett to discuss Weitz's plan to transfer or assist in the emigration of the Christian

¹ The Congress was convened in Jerusalem on 14-30 August 1951.

² Weitz, JNF, to Ya'acov Tzur, ambassador to Argentina, letter dated 15 June 1951, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/16.

³ Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, entry for 28 August 1951, p. 154.

Arabs from the Upper Galilee to South America... "He [Sharett] approved of our conclusion, that I ought to travel to Argentina as an envoy of the government, [ostensibly] to explore the plants of that country, which it might be worth growing in our country, but the real purpose would be to study the possibility of agricultural settlement by the Arabs from the Galilee. Mr Sharett will bring the matter for approval by the Prime Minister and will inform about the results," Weitz recorded.¹ Ben-Gurion's approval came two days later, on 30 August, in a secret letter, sent by the prime minister's secretary to Navon, which read: "Please inform the Foreign Minister that the Prime Minister has instructed me to confirm the reception of the Foreign Minister's letter...and has told me that he approves of the plan proposed in connection with the travel of Mr Yosef Weitz to Argentina."² On the basis of this approval Weitz was preparing to embark on his investigatory mission to South America by the end of 1951, after a delay lasting several months. Before setting off, on 13 November, Weitz obtained an audience with Ben-Gurion. "I said to him [Ben-Gurion] that I came to receive his blessing for my departure before I leave on my way to South America in connection with the transfer matter. First he [seemed] to know nothing. I reminded him that Moshe Sharett had brought before him the matter of investigating the possibility of transferring Christian Arabs from the Upper Galilee to South America. Then he remembered and said that this was a wonderful idea which had a great importance," Weitz recorded.³ Two months earlier, on 2 September, Weitz had informed his immediate boss Avraham Granovsky (Granott), Chairman of the JNF board (and member of the Knesset representing the Progressive Party which was in coalition with the ruling Mapai), "about my [Weitz's] travel in connection with the transfer of Arabs from the Galilee."⁴

Arriving in Argentina on 22 November, Weitz spent five weeks there investigating the possibility of transferring Christian Arab communities from the Galilee to that country. This plan was kept strictly secret. On 4 December Weitz recorded in Santa Fe and Buenos Aires: "The plan of my tour in the towns of the provinces in connection with my mission concerning the matter of the Arabs is being consolidated. It seems that in a week I will be on my way...I have to visit a large estate of 60,000 dunums, which belongs to a Zionist Jew who is prepared to place it under our control for the purpose of our proposal. This should not cost more than 100 Israeli Lira per dunum in our money."⁵ On

¹ Ibid.

² From the prime minister's secretary to Yitzhak Navon, foreign minister's secretary, secret letter, no. 91/17720, dated 30 August 1951, in ISA, foreign ministry 2402/15. During these days Yosef Weitz also demanded that a special envoy be sent to South American countries to investigate the possibility of a large scale transfer of Palestinian refugees and their resettlement there. Yitzhak Navon was sent to South America and toured a number of countries. However when he returned he reported that this idea would not work. See 'Ezra Danin, *Tzioni: Bekhol Tnat* [A Zionist in Every Condition] (autobiographical articles written by Ya'acov Sharett and edited by Gershon Rivlin), Vol. 1, (Jerusalem: Kiddum, 1987), p. 323.

³ Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, entry for 13 November 1951, p. 164.

⁴ Ibid., entry for 2 September 1951, p. 155.

⁵ Ibid., entry for 4 December 1951, p. 168.

21 December Weitz arrived in the province of Cordoba and on the following day entered in his diary: "last week I dealt a lot with the 'transfer' matter. I toured many agricultural farms in the Buenos Aires province. I arrived here yesterday, and also here I dealt with this issue."¹ On New Year's Day, 1 January 1952, he was back in Buenos Aires and recorded: "I am satisfied at my visit here... [as far as the matter] for which I came: knowing the situation in connection with the 'transfer' plan..."²

Weitz was back in Jerusalem at the end of January 1952 and a few days later, on 4 February, he met Foreign Minister Sharett to report on his visit to Argentina and Brazil. "I have given him a brief summary of my accounts on the transfer matter. I have proposed to him to appoint a man from the foreign ministry, who, together with me, would deal with the matter during the time he [Sharett] stays in England in connection with the fund-raising [or United Jewish Appeal] matter. [Sharett] agreed. Reuven Shiloah and [Yehoshu'a] Palmon will be assigned to this task," Weitz recorded.³ The following day Weitz was also granted an audience with Prime Minister Ben-Gurion. "I have raised before him my accounts in connection with the transfer. Regarding this he [Ben-Gurion] remarked that the Christian church would certainly oppose, but it ought to be carried out."⁴ Weitz's written report on his tour in South America, which was sent to the prime minister and the foreign minister on 19 March 1952, will be discussed later. Before writing and sending this report he paid two visits to the village of Jish in an effort to lobby for his transfer scheme.

On 6 March 1952 Weitz travelled with Nahmani to Jish and came to the house of the head of the family which intended to emigrate to Argentina. Weitz recorded: "I have given him the regards from his brother...in Argentina and also details about the quality of soil and agriculture. Nahmani talked about the possibility of emigrating there though a company etc." Weitz added: "All those gathered there, about ten Arabs, kept silent. Only one said that there is nothing better than [our] land in Israel. Even these mountainous [lands] are better than the plain in other countries." However, the head of the family said that although there was a desire among his family to emigrate to Argentina, two of his men must first visit that country and study the conditions there before taking any decision.⁵ Two days later Weitz returned to Jish "to meet with a few Arabs, in order to convey to them the regards of their relatives in Argentina, who are suggesting to them to follow them, because that country is good," Weitz recorded. Weitz also wrote in his diary about how he tried to tempt those few Christian Arabs who gathered to hear him to emigrate to Argentina by describing it as a "country of gold" and "expanding his talk about it, while mixing his talk with all sorts of spices, in order to make that country

¹ Ibid., entry for 22 December 1951, p. 175.

² Ibid., entry for 1 January 1952, p. 179.

³ Ibid., entry for 4 February 1952, p. 184.

⁴ Ibid., entry for 5 February 1952, p. 184.

⁵ Ibid., entry for 6 March 1952, p. 186.

sound pleasant to his listeners. The guest [i.e. Weitz] has had a special interest in that," Weitz recorded. And then, all of a sudden, a member of the audience, who had sat in a corner and kept silent during Weitz's talk, spoke: "But there is no country better than this country of ours. Even our mountains are fertile; even the rock produces and every stone bears fruit." Weitz recorded his reaction:

I glanced at the speaker and a trembling seized me. A day earlier, I had visited 'Ein Zaytun' [Jewish settlement in eastern Galilee] and the desolation there depressed me. Only a few remained in the place. This is also the situation in most of the Kibbutzim, set up after the establishment of the State. These things are particularly said in relation to the mountainous area of the Negev. Do we have among us [Jews] those who see that the rock produces and the stone bears fruit? In contrast to those [Jews], the Christian Arab, native of Gush Halav [Jish] knows that the rock here produces and the stone here bears fruit. Whose homeland is this small and miserable country??? [sic] I cannot forget that Arab. Perhaps he is a descendant of the fanatical Yohanan [Jonathan] of Gush Halav, who also saw the rock and stone this way.¹

It is interesting to note that Yohanan of Gush Halav [today the Arab village of Jish] was one of the senior commanders of the Jewish rebellion against the Romans and that Weitz and his colleagues called their plan to transfer the Christian Arab communities from the Galilee, beginning with the village of Jish, to South America, "Operation Yohanan", after that "fanatical" Jewish rebel leader.

Weitz's full secret memorandum on "Operation Yohanan" and his tour in Argentina and Brazil was dated 15 March 1952 and sent to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, Foreign Minister Sharett and the Chairman of the JNF boards, Dr Avraham Granovsky.² In this report, Weitz explained: "One of the goals...I set before my visit to Argentina and Brazil was to investigate on the ground the possibility of implementing the plan for the emigration of Christian Arabs from Upper Galilee to those countries, and first of all [to begin with] a few of them, residents of Gush Halav [Jish]...We called this plan, in brief and for concealment, Operation Yohanan." The feasibility of "Operation Yohanan", Weitz reported, was examined from both agricultural and political viewpoints. To investigate the agricultural aspects Weitz was assisted by M. Greiber, a JNF executive based in Argentina, and the agronomists Tzvi³ and Dorfman. The latter accompanied Weitz on his tour to the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, La Pampa and Mendoza, and acted as interpreter during the visits to the many villages of French, Italian and English migrants to these provinces. Weitz wrote that the Argentinian government insisted that migrants should be Christians,

¹ Ibid., entry for 8 March 1952, p. 187.

² An edited version of the report was published subsequently in Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, pp. 360-4. The unedited version is found in ISA, (Jerusalem) foreign ministry, 2402/15. The memo was enclosed with a letter to Uri Lubrani, the foreign minister's secretary (and currently Coordinator of Operations in Lebanon), dated 19 March 1952. The letter read: "I am sending to you my memo on 'Operation Yohanan' in order to place it in the hands of the Foreign Minister, when he comes back from abroad."

³ Both Tzvi and Dorfman are mentioned in Ya'acov Tzur's letter to the foreign ministry, dated 8 January 1952, on the subject: "Operation Yohanan". See Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, appendix no. 5, pp. 359-60.

and encouraged agricultural migrants, particularly from Spain and Italy. Weitz also believed that the type of agricultural farm in the provinces of Mendoza and Buenos Aires, which used "extensive agriculture", was "very suitable to an Arab farmer from Israel, because he knows well these plants, and from this viewpoint he is likely to equal the best farmers coming from Spain and Italy, if he works on his farm at the rate he is used to here in the country. The required investment for the setting up of such a farm in the province of Mendoza, which I find the most suitable for the settlement of Arab farmers from the Galilee, is approximately: 48,000 [Pesos Argentinos]." Weitz put the cost of travel of five persons at 13,000 Pesos, and the total cost of setting up a farm for a family of five persons at 61,000 Pesos. He also calculated that this amount was equivalent to 1,250-1,450 Israeli Lira at the time. Weitz's report claimed that 35 families - totalling 261 persons and owing 1,252 dunums - expressed the desire to emigrate to Argentina.¹ However, judging by the earlier described reception accorded to Weitz himself in Jish on 6 and 8 March and the fact that no more than ten persons attended these meetings, and that the report itself reflects Weitz's drive and lobbying efforts for the implementation of "Operation Yohanan", it is by no means certain that 35 families - totalling 261 persons - really wanted to emigrate from Jish to Argentina. In conclusion, Weitz wrote: "From an economic point of view there is a possibility for transfer of most of the Christian Arab population from the villages of Upper Galilee to, and its agricultural resettlement in, Argentina."²

The second major question that Weitz's report dealt with was the feasibility of "Operation Yohanan" from a political point of view and whether the prospective Arab transferees would be allowed to enter and settle in Argentina. The policy of Argentina, Weitz wrote, was to restrict immigration to farmers from Spain and Italy, who would be assimilated easily into Argentinian society and culture; "Arab migrants, even if they are Christians and distinguished peasants, are likely to encounter objection from the government, using the argument that all Arab migrants have abandoned agriculture and have become townspeople, and that their assimilation in the language and culture is a slow process, in comparison with migrants from European countries." Moreover,

another particular difficulty, which is likely to be created in the way of Arab emigration from Israel, is connected with international political problems, since clearly the authorities in Arab countries would not look favourably on the emigration of Arabs from Israel, and the Christian churches would certainly express explicit opposition. There is [also] a fear that the Argentinian government would not want to be the cause of conflict due to these activities, and would refuse to give them entry permission, and even if it would not say it explicitly, but rather would delay the negotiations up to a point where we could not begin actual implementation. In addition there is a fear that the [Argentinian] government would require them [the Arabs] to change

¹ Weitz, *Yomani*, Vol. 4, p. 362.

² *Ibid.*, p. 363

their money into its currency, according to the official rate, and in this way their loss would be big.¹

All these questions were the subject of discussions and consultations which took place in Buenos Aires between Weitz, Ambassador Tzur and a Zionist Jewish lawyer named Marcos Stanovsky, a legal adviser to the Israeli embassy, who was described by Weitz as "an outstanding expert on Argentinian legislation, and being in frequent touch with the authorities and a man of balanced and wise opinion". Stanovsky "has shown great interest in this plan and found it very important for Israel from a political-settlement point of view. As a veteran Zionist, he expressed his desire to assist in the implementation of this plan, and he was the one who proposed a way for its realization," Weitz wrote in his report.² Stanovsky's practical proposals included the following: (1) "A private shareholding company would be set up in Buenos Aires with the capital of one million Pesos." The shareholders would be "people whom lawyer S [Stanovsky] would choose, and they would be, as far as possible, non-Jews"; (2) "This company would be registered as a company for the exploitation of lands and settlement." "The company would approach the immigration authorities there [in Argentina] and ask for the settlers it needs for the exploitation of its lands, with special emphasis on its requirement for Christian and distinguished farmers"; (3) "The company would authorize a man from Israel, who would act as its representative, signing on its behalf contracts with the prospective settlers, [and] on the basis of these contracts, the Arab farmers would ask for immigration visas from the Argentinian legation in Israel"; (4) "In the contact with the [Arab] farmers, the settlers [i.e. the Arabs] would be guaranteed complete ownership over the company's lands, which would be handed over to them. Towards the [Argentinian] authorities, the settlers would sign an undertaking to return to the company, in small annual instalments, the investment in land and their resettlement. Against this undertaking, they [the settlers] would be given an undertaking guaranteed by a bank in Israel, that they would be absolved from this payment to the company."³

On the basis of Weitz's investigations of the agricultural conditions in Argentina and the above-described proposal of Stanovsky, both Weitz and Ambassador Tzur drew the following conclusions:

- a. "Operation Yohanan" was feasible from an economic-financial viewpoint as well as from the viewpoint of the suitability of the Galilee Arabs to the agricultural ways and conditions in Argentina;
- b. If the "company" were established, it would be possible to begin with the transfer of Arabs, starting with 15-20 families, in order to pave the way and acquire experience for the carrying out of the whole operation;

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., pp. 363-4.

- c. The finance required in Argentina would be paid from the JNF finances;
- d. It would be necessary to ensure the recommendation of the Argentinian ambassador to Israel for Arab migration to his country. The handling of this issue should be the responsibility of the Israeli foreign ministry;
- e. "It would be necessary that a man from Israel, who speaks both Arabic and Spanish and is trusted by the Arabs and the JNF, would accompany the first group on its way to Argentina and be a guide to it in the first few months";
- f. Lawyer Stanovsky took upon himself the job of registering the company and choosing its members, and "would take care of ensuring our ownership over the company's capital";
- g. The carrying out of the operation, and the financial activities involved in it, would be entrusted to a four-member committee based in Argentina, which would include Stanovsky, the agronomist Dorfman and one official at the embassy in Buenos Aires. None of these committee members would officially appear as company shareholders. The agronomist Dorfman would in effect be appointed as the company director, and would deal with the purchasing of land, settlement preparations, etc.¹

Weitz concluded his memorandum with the following: "the time has come now to study the matter and decide whether to pursue this path and begin implementing the plan or to put it off and abandon it. Those responsible to, and interested in, this plan are the government and the JNF, and this report comes in three copies to be sent to the prime minister, the foreign minister and the chairman of the JNF directorate, in order to prompt them to get together for discussion in the next few days."²

A similar secret report on the feasibility of "Operation Yohanan" and Weitz's tour in Argentina was written by Ambassador Tzur. Although this report, sent to the director of the foreign ministry Middle East department in Jerusalem on 8 January 1952,³ shortly after Weitz returned from Argentina, contained some elements of Weitz's aforementioned report, it also provided an illustration of Tzur's thinking on the transfer plan and the means that ought to be used to bring about its implementation. Tzur's report began by explaining that the subject under discussion was "Operation Yohanan"; "For convenience we will henceforth call by this name the plan of transferring families of Arab farmers from the Upper Galilee villages for settlement in Argentina." Tzur continued: "As you know Mr Weitz spent five weeks in Argentina in order to

¹ Ibid., p. 364.

² See Weitz's secret report in ISA, foreign ministry 2402/15.

³ See Ya'acov Tzur, Buenos Aires, to director of the foreign ministry Middle East department, secret letter dated 8 January 1952, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15.

investigate the concrete possibilities of carrying out his plan...Also in the little time that was left available to him he managed to hold conversations with a number of experts in this place, and even to visit those Argentinian provinces, which are suitable, according to presupposition, for the settlement of the type of ordinary farmer, in the conditions of land cultivation existing in the Upper Galilee." Ambassador Tzur was very conscious of the need to keep the operation secret: "The whole plan was kept, of course, strictly secret. We let participate in the discussions only Mr Greiber, the JNF director here, and the agronomists Tzvi and Dorfman...and the legal adviser to the embassy, lawyer Marcos Stanovsky, whose clear reasoning, wide knowledge and logical analysis helped us to articulate and clarify the way in which we will proceed in order to implement the plan."

In his report, Ambassador Tzur outlined the conclusions he, Weitz, Stanovsky, Greiber and the agronomists Dorfman and Tzvi had arrived at in their discussions, and after investigations, in Argentina:

1. "The operation is feasible, whether from a financial-economic viewpoint or from the viewpoint of the suitability of the people [the Arabs] for the agricultural methods in Argentina";
2. The operation "should be started on a small scale, by the transfer of the first 10-20 families, in order to prepare the ground for the emigration of the rest, and to learn from experience";
3. "Matters should be directed in a way which would enable us to meet most of the expenditures in Argentinian Pesos. This would substantially reduce the financial burden. Moreover it would be worth directing the operation, as far as possible, without embroiling in any way the government of Israel, but rather to present it as a private initiative of the emigrants themselves, and of a commercial company, which would bring them for settlement on its lands";
4. "For this plan a shareholding private company would be set up in Buenos Aires with a capital of one million Pesos. According to the local law the share capital is not subject to government inspection, with the exception of 2 per cent of the company's...The first group [of the shareholders] would be composed of people who would be used as a cover, and no Jews, as far as possible, would be among them. Lawyer Stanovsky took on himself to set up the company and to register it, and he would also ensure our ownership over the company capital through the allocation of shares";
5. "This company would be registered as a company for exploiting lands and settlement, something which is not an innovation in Argentina. The company would approach the [Argentinian] immigration authorities and

request the settlers needed by it for the exploitation of its land, by specially emphasizing its request for Christians and...peasants";

6. "The settlement company would authorize a representative in Israel, who would in fact be appointed by the JNF. This representative would sign on behalf of the company contracts with the prospective settlers. On the basis of those contracts, the [Arab] peasants would ask for immigration visas from the Argentinian embassy in Israel";

7. "In particular, there is a need to ensure that this request for immigration would be accompanied by the recommendation of the [Argentinian] ambassador in Israel, and for their part, the company representatives would reinforce it in direct negotiation with the authorities here...For this purpose we must ensure the cooperation of [Pablo] Manguel [the Argentinian ambassador to Israel], whose attitude to the transfer of this Arab population has been negative until now. This is one of the major tasks to be entrusted to the Foreign Ministry";

8. "In the contract, the prospective settlers in Argentina would be guaranteed complete ownership of the company's lands handed over to them. For the sake of orderly arrangement, the settlers would sign an undertaking to return to the company, in small annual instalments [*sic*], the costs of land and settlement. However, the Arabs would be guaranteed by an opposite undertaking, given to them with a guarantee from a certain bank in Israel";

9. "The first group of emigrants would be accompanied by a person who speaks both Arabic and Spanish, and could be some sort of guide for them in Israel";

10. "The implementation of the operation and all the financial transactions involved in it would be entrusted to a four-member committee here, which would be composed of lawyer Stanovsky, Mr M. Greiber, the agronomist Dorfman and one of the [Israeli] embassy's officials, who would be appointed by me [Tzur]. None of these members would officially appear among the company shareholders. The agronomist Dorfman would in fact be appointed as the company director. He took on himself preparatory work, the purchase of lands, the machinery, the building of houses, etc. Mr Dorfman would begin his paid job immediately after the plan is approved by the relevant institution in the country [in Israel]."

Tzur concluded his report with the following:

This way of operating appears to us the most convenient, although unpleasant surprises could, of course, occur, especially in the primary stages. In any event, this operation is worth trying and needless to say the embassy puts itself, and its capability, in the service of [carrying out] the operation, although it [the embassy] would have,

of course, to remain, as far as possible, in the shade. It is worth ensuring that all correspondence on this matter is carried out through our [diplomatic] mail and that dispatches are sent in the Foreign Ministry code.

Tzur also asked the director of the foreign ministry Middle East department to "bring the essence" of this report before Sharett, "because of the special interest the Foreign Minister has in this plan."¹

The need to keep "Operation Yohanan", at least in the primary stages of its implementation, strictly secret was considered paramount by Ambassador Tzur and other senior officials of the foreign ministry in Jerusalem, in order to avoid potential internal criticism and external objections. For instance, on 29 January 1952, the director of the foreign ministry South American department, Avraham Darom, wrote a letter to Ambassador Tzur (a copy was sent to the director of the foreign ministry Middle East department), saying: "I have read with great interest your report on Mr Yosef Weitz's activities and the reports submitted by Stanovsky... Since we have decided to keep this matter as most secret, I do not think that it is desirable to convey to our ambassadors abroad further information" on "Operation Yohanan". Darom also assured Tzur that if "the Foreign Ministry decided to carry out [the operation] we would do our utmost to assist it." Moreover Darom went on to tell Tzur about a meeting he had a few days earlier with the Argentinian ambassador to Israel, Manguel:

I [Darom] asked him what is his stance towards Arabs emigrating from Israel to Argentina. He replied to me that he has always opposed this, since he is convinced that the Arabs are not a human element suitable for Argentina. Then he told me that in one of his visits in Galilee, he was invited to one of the Arab villages, whose [Israeli military] governor asked his assistance in obtaining entry visas to his country. I [Darom] said to him [Manguel] that I had heard about a corporation being set up for purchasing of lands in Argentina for the settlement of Christian Arabs from Israel. He replied to me that in such a case, if such migration does not cost the Argentinian government, and it would be guaranteed that the migrants would be employed in agricultural work, and if this would not be mass migration, he would discuss such a possibility after a pledge that every candidate would meet the requirement.²

However, Darom's proposal to avoid strictly secret information on "Operation Yohanan" being passed on even to Israeli ambassadors abroad came perhaps too late. Already on 8 January 1952 Israel's minister to Brussels, Michael 'Amir, wrote a letter to his superiors in the foreign ministry, expressing "amazement" at the transfer plan of "Operation Yohanan".³ A copy of this letter was sent to Tzur in Buenos Aires, who wrote to 'Amir expressing

¹ Ibid.

² From Avraham Darom, director of the foreign ministry South American department, to Israel's ambassador to Buenos Aires, letter dated 29 January 1952, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15. Manguel himself did not speak any language apart from Spanish and seemed to have relied greatly on his Zionist Jewish private secretary, Ya'acov Niviasky, in dealing with Israeli officials.

³ From Ya'acov Tzur, to M. 'Amir, ambassador to Brussels, strictly secret letter, dated 27 February 1952, in ISA foreign ministry, 2402/15.

indignation at the circulation of details on the transfer operation; "The most astonishing thing in this affair is that the plan held as strictly secret is the subject of conversations and discussions in circles which are not directly connected to this matter. This is not evidence of political maturity on the part of my long-time friend Yosef Fisher" - the man who seems to have told Ambassador 'Amir about the operation. In his attempt to stifle 'Amir's criticisms, Tzur went on to say that this plan had nothing to do with the inhabitants of Nazareth, and denied that the plan was aimed at "mass evacuation" of 20,000 people from the Galilee but was rather aimed at transferring peasants from one single village in Upper Galilee. He also wrote that the plan was still at an early stage and that it was difficult to judge its "actual feasibility"; however, it was "worth trying" since, he said, the "chances are very good if we do not fail in the implementation stages." Moreover, the plan would not be subject to any political negotiation, but would be arranged privately between the settlement company and the Arab candidates for transfer and settlement.¹

Ambassador Tzur was clearly lying about the intention of "Operation Yohanan", which was not merely the transfer of a few farmers from a "single" Arab village (i.e., Jish) in Upper Galilee to Argentina. Tzur's report, described above, to the foreign office, dated 8 January 1952, talked about the transfer of Arab farmers from the "villages" of Upper Galilee and that the operation should begin with the "transfer of the first 10-20 families, in order to prepare the ground for the emigration of the rest." Moreover, the report asserted that the operation was feasible from a financial-economic viewpoint as well as regarding the suitability of the Galilee Arabs for the agricultural conditions in Argentina. But perhaps more importantly, Tzur never questioned, and most likely was in agreement with, the aims of "Operation Yohanan", outlined in the above-mentioned letter of Weitz to Tzur (a copy was also sent to Foreign Minister Sharett), dated 15 June 1951. Weitz wrote: "the chief purpose of this matter is the transfer of the Arab population from Israel. I have always, and already before the establishment of the state, feared the Arab minority in our midst [i.e. in Israel], and these fears are still existing, not in theory, but in practice...By the transfer of the Arab minority from Israel through mutual agreement, we will achieve a solution for [the problem of land shortage and ingathering of Jewish exiles in Israel]...From this point of view I see the wish of one group from the village of Gush Halav [Jish] as the beginning of the way to realize the idea." The architects of "Operation Yohanan", Weitz, Tzur, Foreign Minister Sharett - as we shall see - were preparing to engineer "mass emigration" of Arabs from the Galilee in order to reduce substantially the Arab minority in Israel.

When submitting his report on "Operation Yohanan" to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Foreign Minister Sharett in mid-March 1952, Weitz urged them to ensure a speedy government decision on the matter. However, this decision appears to have been delayed for several months. Impatient with such a delay and feeling that his efforts were not being given due consideration, Weitz went

¹ Ibid.

to see Ben-Gurion on 16 September 1952. The two men talked about the possibility of buying land from the prospective Arab emigrants, and Weitz raised the idea of buying land from the churches. Ben-Gurion shared Weitz's views about the need to reduce substantially the Arab minority, but sounded more sceptical and realistic about whether the purchase of land would prompt large numbers of Arabs to emigrate. He may also have told Weitz that the churches would object to the transfer of Christian Arabs from the Galilee to Argentina. Weitz recorded in his diary: "I disagreed with his attitude. I said that we have an interest in weakening the powers of the churches...He wanted me to produce for him a detailed list of the lands and the number of Arabs connected with them, who would leave the country, if we buy [the land]," and then the question of allocating financial resources would be discussed.¹ Three weeks later Weitz wrote to Foreign Minister Sharett urging once more that the government should decide on whether to proceed with "Operation Yohanan".²

As a result of Weitz's lobbying, Sharett, who had publicly acquired a reputation for moderation towards the Palestinian Arabs, wrote a most revealing letter to Ben-Gurion, dated 21 October 1952, in which he explained:

the explorations carried out by the JNF regarding the possibility of transferring Arab farmers from Israel have borne their initial fruits. A few families from the village of Jish (Gush Halav) submitted a request to enable their transfer under certain conditions. The JNF is asking now for a political decision, whether or not it should go ahead in this matter towards implementation. I intend to reply positively and I wish to be sure that I am doing this with your approval. Certainly we have to take into account that with the progress of the Operation it could not be kept secret, and the publicity would encourage polemics of accusations against us that we are dispossessing the Arabs, or at least do not let them to hold their ground in Israel. To the extent that the emigrants would be Christians, another claim would be added regarding the undermining of the foundations of Christianity in Israel. It seems to me that we should not be deterred by these accusations, and that achievement resulting from showing the way/guiding for an organized exodus of part of the Arab population outweighs [these accusations]

Sharett asked the prime minister for a reply as soon as possible.³ For Foreign Minister Sharett, like Weitz and Tzur, the transfer of a few families from Jish to Argentina was conceived as the mere beginning of a wide-scale operation designed to induce the "emigration" of a large section of the Israeli Arabs.

¹ Weitz, *Yomani*, vol. 4, entry for 16 September 1952, p. 208.

² From Yosef Weitz to Moshe Sharett, foreign minister, 6 October 1952, letter No. b/2/01017/yv/hl, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15. Weitz also enclosed a memorandum sent by a group of families from Jish to the JNF office, expressing their desire to emigrate to Argentina, and wrote "the details mentioned in the memorandum are not important. In a serious negotiation on implementation, they would be altered and improved" to our benefit.

³ From the foreign minister (Sharett) to the prime minister, strictly secret letter, no. my/52/148, dated 21 October 1952, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15.

Two weeks later, on 3 November, a consultation was held, most likely at Sharett's instruction, among foreign ministry senior officials, who included: the director, Walter Eytan; the director of the foreign ministry's political division in 1948-9 and founder of the Mossad intelligence service, Reuven Shiloah; Arye Levavi (later to become ambassador to Argentina in 1958-60 and director-general of the foreign ministry in 1964-8); Ya'acov Hertzog (the brother of Haim Hertzog, president of Israel from 1983 to 1993), who later became secretary to the cabinet under Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir; and the head of the foreign ministry research division, Katriel Katz. The participants were all of one opinion: "the plan [i.e. "Operation Yohanan"] should be approved," as Eytan summed up in his memorandum to Sharett. Other remarks made at the consultation included: (1) that the "plan" "should be kept secret as far as possible"; (2) that the "plan" should not be approached as an operation: "[It should not be presented] as a government action, but as emigration of individuals like the emigration from Lebanon"; (3) "The people would depart and arrive in Argentina as citizens of Israel and our [i.e. the Israeli] embassy there should extend to them all the assistance required until their naturalization [in that country]."¹

Having obtained the approval of the prime minister and consulted his senior officials, Sharett replied to Weitz on 4 November:

In reply to your letter dated 6 October [1952], and after I have consulted the Prime Minister and other colleagues in the Foreign Ministry, who accepted my opinion, I here inform you that we approve of the implementation of the plan, which it has been agreed to call "Operation Yohanan" (the emigration of Christian Arabs from the Upper Galilee to Argentina and Brazil). It seems to us that it is absolutely desirable to keep this matter secret for the time being. In any case, we should promote matters in a way which would enable us, at a time of need, to present this movement [publicly] as emigration of individuals conducted on the initiative and responsibility of those concerned - similar to the emigration of the Maronites from Lebanon - and not as a government operation. We assume in advance that the departees would leave and arrive at their destination as subjects of Israel and until their naturalization in the new country the Israeli embassy would extend to them all the required assistance. Thus the permission to begin implementation has been given and I ask you to inform me about any progress.

A copy of Sharett's letter was sent to the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires.²

Immediately after receiving Sharett's letter, Weitz got in touch with the representatives of the prospective emigrant families from Jish and talked to them about sending their emissaries to Argentina to find out about the agricultural conditions of that country. However, in early January 1953 Weitz reported back to the foreign minister explaining that they [the families from Jish] had "changed their minds and withdrawn from the plan." Weitz added in

¹ Eytan's memorandum, dated 3 November 1952, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15.

² From M. Sharett to Yosef Weitz, letter no. 583/52, dated 4 November 1952, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15.

disappointment: "this is exactly what I feared, that the opportunity would be missed due to delays on our part. Nonetheless we [in the JNF] will try to go back to them and persuade [them to emigrate]." ¹ In his diary Weitz wrote: "in the meantime the security-economic conditions in the country changed in favour of the inhabitants of the Galilee villages, and the plan [i.e. "Operation Yo-hanan"] melted away like morning clouds in spring time." ² The withdrawal of those families from Jish from this plan, however, did not bring an end to the efforts of Weitz and the foreign ministry to promote ideas and schemes of Arab transfer to South America. ³

¹ From Yosef Weitz to Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, letter no. b/2/2009/yv/hl, dated 4 January 1953, in ISA, foreign ministry, 2402/15.

² Weitz, *Yomani*, Vol. 4, appendix no. 5, p. 365.

³ See for instance Weitz's secret letter Gide'on Shomron of the foreign ministry, dated 22 February 1953, in Weitz's papers, general correspondence, a 10, Institute for Settlement Research, Rehovot.

